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ABSTRACT

Presented as a conversation rather than as a single-voiced academic paper, this paper describes the three people's experiences with experimental academic writing as students and as teachers. It describes such writing (or autobiographical scholarship) as a hybrid blend of autobiographical bits and scholarship, writing and reading, public and private, accessibility and specificity which is inspired by or collaborates with feminist, anti-elitist, multi-ethnic, reader-response, ecocritical, and postmodern theories. The paper then describes teaching experimental kinds of writing alongside more traditional forms, and notes that experimental writing helps students who have felt less engaged with standard academic writing to discover voices they had closeted and enables them to enter the conversation where conformity to standard approaches had left them mute. According to the paper, the writing teachers have also noted that experimental writing draws students into what they are writing about in interesting ways. It is then noted that experimental writing raises new questions about evaluating writing--evaluating experimental writing requires more dialogue with the writer to understand the experiment. The paper concludes that although experimental writing requires more dialogue with students, teachers think of their students more as writers and the students respond more as writers--with skills, knowledge, intention, and an ability and desire to learn and to use writers' tools. (RS)

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ED 416 484

Experimental Academic Writing

Randi Browning, Diane Freedman, Denise Stephenson

This was a presentation at the 1997 4C's Convention in Phoenix. True to experimental forms, we presented this as a conversation rather than as a single voiced academic paper.

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Denise 1

For me, experimental writing began in graduate school. I was studying feminist theory and thought that surely different writing must accompany different thinking. Patriarchy, I reasoned, must be contained in the form as well as the content. I wrote a piece combining what I considered three voices: narrative vignettes, theoretical questionings, and the quotes of authors I was reading at the time. That first attempt was very successful. Not only did I get excited writing it, but it became my first published article. That experiment led to others, including a dissertation focused on the breadth of writing that can be called academic.

Now I run a writing center and am currently teaching a section of first year composition. My delight in the experimental, my belief that playing with language is how we develop as writers, and my sense that form is organic does not fit neatly with the system I find myself in. I continue to write in unusual ways and share that with my tutors and my students, but I find that it can be very difficult to encourage participation in this enterprise when grades lie in the balance and many faculty on campus don't agree with my perspectives.

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Diane

I wrote my thesis on poet-critics whose prose blended poetry and prose, identification and analysis. It became a book in which I included my own poems and stories of sexual harassment and mixed-religious and class background as I analyzed and appreciated poems and essays by Adrienne Rich, Gloria Anzaldúa, Marge Piercy, Susan Griffin, Cherrie Moraga, Alice Walker, and others. I was drawn to writing that accommodated multiple voices and selves, the poetic license I'd had not only as an undergraduate but in a graduate creative writing program before I entered a doctoral program in literature, and the knowledge of writing as process I'd gained while teaching and administering in a university writing program and earning an M.A.T. degree.

I collaborated with two other women on a collection of what we had come to term autobiographical criticism. The project grew out of our disenchantment with some of the exclusionary and uncreative practices of our profession and our pleasure in teaching personal, associative, voiced writing to our various students in several settings. It grew out of our enthusiasm for experiments already published by Jane Tompkins, Jane Gallop, Nancy Mairs, and many others.

Autobiographical scholarship is what I continue most to enjoy writing and teaching; the productive tension, or continuum, between meditative/creative essay-writing and attending to published texts

attracts students in creative writing, journalism, composition, and literature, and English-teaching programs. A hybrid blend of autobiographical bits and scholarship, writing and reading, public and private, accessibility and specificity is inspired by or collaborates with feminist, anti-elitist, multi-ethnic, reader-response, ecocritical, and postmodern theories. Because it is self-examining, user-friendly, multiple, sometimes a collage, a dialogue, a meditation in the spirit of the great essayists, political, poetical, and pedagogically exciting, students warm to it. It's not the only creative or alternative writing I'd like to see from students or engage in myself, but it's so far been the most useful and the one about which I know the most—so as to recommend models to students, be able to evaluate and grade it, be able to coach it.

Randi

After nearly twenty years of teaching, I took a leave to finally work on my Ph.D. I encountered experimental writing during my first semester at RPI during a rhetorical theory class; the teacher, Roxanne Mountford, assigned a traditional conference paper or an experimental paper depending on what made sense with our topic. I had never heard of experimental writing before, but since I was writing on feminist rhetorical theory, experimenting with forms and approaches less phallocentric made sense. Guided only by what I read in Lillian Bridwell Bowles's article ("Discourse and Diversity in the Academy") and my wonderfully supportive and insightful classmates and teacher, I jumped in. It was some of the most exciting, terrifying, meaningful, and challenging writing I had ever done. I

felt the excitement of a child again—engaged in new ways of thinking and working with words and ideas. I knew that I had interacted with and understood the material I was writing about more deeply than I had with more traditional papers, and I wanted to know more about what that experience suggested for other writers and teachers. Was it just that after so many years of traditional papers, I was ready for something new? Would this process and approach be as meaningful to undergraduates? To less skilled writers? And what would this mean for teachers? Would other teachers let me keep exploring non-traditional types of writing so I could learn more and practice? Now that I am back to teaching and directing a writing program at a small liberal arts college where I and several of my colleagues are inviting our undergraduates to experiment with their writing, I am learning from them that my experience was not atypical. As I prepare for exams and my eventual dissertation on this topic, I am still intrigued—both as writer and as teacher—by the process and the possibilities, by what it does to one's sense of self, of audience, of the subject matter, and by what it does to thinking, learning, and teaching.

Denise

Again and again we hear the argument that students need to learn the five paragraph essay if they are going to be able to get beyond it. They need to learn to write a strong thesis before they can write without one. They need to use complete sentences before they can write captivating fragments.

But do they? We're not at all certain that these progressions really exist. That is, they may not be accurate descriptions of writing development. Using a kind of "training wheels" approach, faculty often presume students are beginning writers and are therefore not ready for the freedoms of exploration, particularly experimental writing.

In real world writing, academic or not, the structures are much more fluid than those we assign to students. Writing seldom contains a simple thesis and simple-minded supporting paragraphs coded to that thesis. Fragments abound. The creativity expressed by professional writers need not be denied students. Freedom of creativity fosters interest and commitment. It challenges students to think rather than merely try to find ingredients to fill the proscribed form. When the focus shifts from the noun "form" to the verbal "forming," writers become engaged, active in a process, rather than following a recipe. We argue that we can't expect students to produce good writing when what we define as good writing in the world is not an available choice for them to emulate.

Randi

This quarter I'm teaching a course that all students who are going to tutor have to take—theory, philosophy, and practice of teaching writing, emphasis on one-on-one teaching. One of their four papers must be written experimentally; they choose which one. Then I have a small seminar—it started out as an independent study, but word spread and so did the enrollment—in experimental writing. The first group are all "good" writers

and especially the younger ones are not sure about writing experimentally. They are used to getting it "right" and knowing exactly what that means. They have commented that their initial idea was that experimental writing was an excuse to ramble or throw anything in, but once they tried it, they found that it was much more complex and difficult and rich and satisfying. Here's what one student wrote in her response journal:

> At first I thought experimental writing was kind of an "anything goes" field. As I went over my autobio again and looked at it with you, I began to see that this is not really true, that experimental writing needs to follow its own organization and be true to itself, not just ramble aimlessly. Then I got pretty excited about revising.

The other group—the experimental writing seminar—are all design-your-own-major folks, most are feminists, hungry for a way to find and express their own voices in their own way. They thought experimental writing would be easy and comforting. What they found when they tried to write is that their thoughts were not as clear as they thought they were, and it would take more than just opening up possibilities. So experimental writing invited them in to a significant place in writing, but it also required them to shape, form, and play with their thoughts and voices rather than just complain that the conventional approaches have silenced them. That's different from what they thought—and harder. All these students are getting into it in a transformational way, but the ways experimental writing challenges them is different than they thought it would be.

Diane

I also have found that students don't necessarily have to credential themselves in all kinds of university-sanctioned writing before experimenting (or imitating others' experiments) but it will help the writing (not just the credentialling public) if the writer has a sense of options and of having consciously made some sort of choice towards and away from something else. I know that when I teach literature courses, especially, say, my survey in American lit, my students and I have better conversations about literature when the "non-canonical" (as in not of long-standing fame and curricular inclusion) and "non-traditional" (as in not of the dominant genres usually taught) literature is somehow in conversation or tension with the supposed "canonical" and "traditional." I find we need something to push against—although that may be a holdover from the way in which my generation of scholars has entered the New American lit—from the shored-up canon to and through the widening stream.

I guess I end up encouraging my students to experiment with models in mind. Some part of their process involves a textual flying buttress of some kind—whether theoretical writers justifying the experiment (these writers may also be academic experimental writers themselves, but they have also been metadiscursive en route: Nancy Miller, Jane Tompkins, Mary Ann Caws, Alice Walker, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ruth Behar) or creative models like those mentioned before (if these folks don't appear in a cover comment they appear in the main body of a "paper" or as floating, stage and genre-setting epigraphs, or in footnotes).

In my courses (I teach one of these at the grad level and one at the undergrad level every three semesters or so), nominally in American literature but focusing specifically on hybrid critics who write creative hybrids of scholarly-creative-personal prose (how's that for a mouthful?), I ask my students to write like them but also, and first, I assign a compare and contrast paper of analysis of two or three exemplary practitioners, then a personal-associative paper on an issue or theme evoked in our early readings, then an annotated bibliography of hybrid works similar to those on our collective reading list, and then an extended experimental piece OR a research-based analytical paper about the genre(s) encountered. The culminatory writing is usually wonderful, often publishable, but it is not as wildly experimental as it might be.

Denise

So, both of you are able to teach experimental kinds of writing along side more traditional forms. I'm teaching a first year composition course right now, and it's not that simple. There's a presumption about what comes first, or what is most important for academic writing, and that is thesis-driven writing.

One morning as I was driving in to work, I realized that one of the hang-ups in the "old" method of teaching writing is that it presumes students are novices at writing. It presumes they have little or no experience with the language, especially the written word. In some cases this is true, but not all. As one who learned to write without "formal" instruction (I was never

taught the five paragraph structure that I can recall), I believe that in addition to communicating, I wrote well because I played with ideas. Playing with ideas and playing with forms often goes hand in hand.

Randi

If ever there were a group of people who were able to just write, we are probably it. We mastered the forms and wrote papers that got good grades, smiley faces, and stars. Experimental writing may be intriguing yet terrifying to those of us who have thrived in the reduced ambiguity of prescribed forms, but for those students who would never use "academic writing" in the same sentence with words like "interesting" or "meaningful" or "fun," experimental writing can be a lifeline. It connects them to academic writing in ways they never felt connected before, and it provides a way into scholarship that they never knew existed.

Experimental writing seems to transform the perspective of any writer or teacher, but for the students who have felt less engaged with standard academic writing than we might have, experimental writing helps them discover voices they had closeted and enables them to enter the conversation where conformity to standard approaches had left them mute. Knowing about other options, are we teaching responsibly by continuing to ask our students to channel their complex worlds into simple, artificial, predictable forms and to limit their inquiry by what will eventually fit those forms? Isn't it time we teach students other

possibilities—ways they can interact with ideas and words that exceed narrow forms and traditional approaches?

Denise

I have a situation that fits what you describe, Randi. One of my frosh seems to be a "real" writer. By that I mean, she's busy playing with language and form. And yet, she's a single mother, a little older than the other students. She doesn't have a lot of self-confidence. After a recent portfolio meeting in which the dreaded thesis was high on the list of grading criteria, I feared for this student. I considered "straightening her out" in terms of how to write in a way that the group would find "acceptable." But I chose not to. (Not that I'm hiding the reality from her, but I also didn't suggest she not follow her instinct.) She was starting an interview piece about working moms by beginning with a timeline page that demonstrated how busy this woman is from the moment she wakes up. That will be the "point" (I won't say thesis) of her paper. I thought it was really interesting. We talked about how her sentences and style could accentuate the speed and busy-ness of this woman. I didn't set out to teach "experimental writing" in this class. But when it appeared, I wasn't going to fight it or call it wrong. Rather, I'm trying to persuade my portfolio group of its value.

Diane

I had a student come in earlier this semester to ask whether I would "mind" if in her paper about Jamaica Kincaid's "The Circling Hand" (part of the novel Annie John) she inserted mother-daughter exchanges (of her own creative devising) between various sections of the paper. Of course not, I told her, though I also used the chat as an opportunity to talk about different voices in critical texts, what an epigraph is and how it is usually printed, what a block quotation does, what double or triple roles the critic plays and might wish at times (like this one) to foreground. Then I showed her some of my own writing with its multiple commentators, and she was excited. She knew that she knew how to write traditional argumentative writing, as she'd taken a course in that limited (to her) form elsewhere, and she's now a mother of a child and evidently has insights to bring in to her Kincaid paper. So, like Denise's student, this student should not be derailed.

Randi

You've both captured the issue of responsibility that I think we should address. Is teaching or allowing experimental writing irresponsible? Will our students be hurt by it? Do we have a responsibility to socialize our students to standard academic writing (as if that were one thing)? Do we do them a disservice if we allow them to "play" (with words, forms, ideas...) in our classes and then send them out with confidence, unprepared to face the harsh (objective, rigid) world of the academy with unrealistic expectations of what it means to write academic papers or the importance/unimportance of their voice(s)?

I think this is the worry that some in our profession have about experimental writing. In fact it reminds me of the debate or discussion between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae a couple of years ago. Although they weren't addressing experimental writing specifically, they did frame the question for us about whether we are responsible for helping students develop as academic writers or as writers. There has long been a tension in education between the function of socialization and the opportunity for original/revolutionary/transformational/creative work. I think this is what we're looking at here. Can we really straddle the fence and try to do both? Maybe if we stop privileging the traditional approach to writing/learning across the board, we could explore many ways of writing, delving into ideas, viewing the world. Maybe having to choose one or the other is a false choice, and as a profession we should refuse it. I would love my students to see themselves as versatile writers and thinkers—both in and out of the academy. But when students have a hard time imagining or trying something new with their writing, I realize the chilling and narrowing effects our practices have on our their thinking and expression.

Denise

If I'm a writing teacher (or tutor or writing center director) then my responsibility is to help students become writers. They are already students. They are deeply socialized to be students, which far too often means accepting authority and regurgitating rather than thinking. I don't

want to do more of that socialization. Now, to do what I do responsibly does mean not denying that such socialization is real. I try to be clear with my students that other teachers do want certain forms, like the five paragraph essay. But I point out that I don't think this is the best writing. When I prepared my class for a required in-class writing, the five paragraph beast came up, and I supported how helpful it can be when there's a limited amount of time. I also pointed out why it may not be the best in other situations because of its limitations. That's how I walk the line. Challenging students to think and write creatively, complexly, sometimes messily is what I believe I need to do to be responsible.

Diane

At the University of New Hampshire, our literature students come to folks like me with a writing-course experience very much in the Donald Murray/writing-as-discovery, voice-before-all mode (which is wonderful, of course), but that means that my issues here may be different from yours. I do find myself wanting and needing to name for students the experience they had in that course and contrast it—at least slightly—with what will be expected of them in even other English department courses, let alone others in the college or at the university. That is, I do feel it my pragmatic and ethical and pedagogic obligation to let students know that theses are expected, though not always essential, that support has to be gathered for any claims made, that we use the MLA parenthetical documentation system, and where the reserve reading desk is located and all that. Too many students arrive in senior-level courses floundering.

Randi

So where does that leave us: what is our responsibility? To help writers develop? To teach students all the tools and approaches writers can use? To encourage students to see the integrity of the writer's thoughts and words and subject matter? To help students to feel like writers, to think as writers? To socialize our students, unquestioningly, to a tradition that will be expected of them in other classes? To teach them forms (I wanted to say, to reduce writing to conventions)?

Denise

Earlier Randi, you questioned if choosing either experimental or traditional writing was a false choice. I think it is, as most either /or choices tend to be. They reduce the world to the binary, the simplistic. It's not either "traditional" or "experimental." What we're calling experimental is by no means new. Perhaps it hasn't become commonplace. Perhaps that's because of gatekeepers, or because of what's easiest—unconventional writing is often more difficult than writing in conventional ways. Besides, we never leave all conventions behind. We keep many, if not most conventions, or no one would make sense of what we write. I want to add experimentation to the repertoire of others (other forms, other writers). I want creativity of form as well as content valued. I guess I've come to believe that what we think is related to the way we think. So if the form is limited, it limits the

thinking. I'm most interested in the thinking of writing, so I'm willing to allow the writing itself to explore. I've come to believe that is what the literary "essay" does, it's just not what we usually ask of "school writing" or of academic articles.

Randi

I've had several students who have commented that experimental writing doesn't just change what you can include in a paper or how you organize and structure a piece, it changes HOW YOU EVEN THINK about that topic—what questions or ideas you entertain instead of reject—and it changes what topics you might even think to write about. I think our students have gotten too used to limiting thought and accepting the compromise they must make to fill that form. That compromise with intellectual exploration and creative communication is probably a big part of why academic writing bores them.

With experimental writing, students can't sit on the sidelines, so to speak. Experimental writing introduces and demands that students take on the decision-making/choice-making process of a writer, which is often obscured or diminished when so many decisions have already been made for them. I'm finding that experimental writing draws students into what they are writing about in very interesting ways.

Let me tell you about Jodi, a first-quarter transfer student and a poet who followed her sister into my experimental writing seminar. For her second

paper, she really wanted to do something with her notebook full of poetry, but I had asked them all to experiment with standard academic material. "What about your African music class?" I asked a disappointed Jodi. "No, I'm really not enjoying that class, and I'm not into it at all," she responded. "I'm not even sure I understand the material well enough to write anything about it." But the rest of us encouraged her to take on the challenge, and she consented. Soon she was intrigued by the idea of having the subject matter shape how she would write. She wasn't exactly sure how to organize and choose words so that the style was part of the message and meaning of African music (rhythms, call and response, percussion patterns. . .), but she's clearly having to understand the music better in order to begin to see the relationships of writing to knowledge. She was searching for a deeper coherence or relationship between the "what" and the "how" of her writing experience. By the time she brought in a draft, she was excited. She was not only into the paper, but into the class in a whole new way. She no longer talked about how much she didn't know. Her conversation had shifted to the relationship of the elements of African music and to strategies for how to represent music in writing. It was the most interesting transformation I had seen in such a short time.

Denise

That is my experience as an experimental writer. It's finding a fit of voice, style and content that makes me form writing differently. I want form to fit function and content.

Your comments, Randi, are also about the connection between thinking and writing. Experimental writing is perfect for critical thinking. I know on the surface it may not seem that way to some, but experimental writing forces students to think in new and creative ways so that form can emerge out of thinking. Experimental writing is no excuse for not thinking. I know traditionalists may think of it that way, but it's not my experience. In first year composition classes, often the students who fill the *thesis—three supports—conclusion* form do not have to engage with the material they are writing about, and consequently, they turn out a piece well formed but ill thought. On the other hand, if the student has to think to find the form, the text must be well thought to even be produced.

Randi

I'd like to explore experimental writing's relationship with conventions a little more—is it oppositional? compatible? transformational? Is it all or nothing? Does it have a developmental relationship? Does it reject or change the role of audience?

Diane

I think experimental writing's relation to "conventional" writing is perhaps best thought of as transformational, to use Randi's term. After students try it (at least, after my students tried my dominant version of experimental writing—personal-associative prose), their other writing in the course or

for other courses is always already transformed—or contaminated!—with the personal even when it is not self-disclosing. That is, there's suddenly room for the conversation, the play of being ready for anything, but most of all being ready to flex, being in flex.

Denise

I think experimental writing can be oppositional, compatible AND transformational. Those who live in an either/or world insist on the oppositional (argument and all). Experimental writing is different, so it's oppositional. It's also compatible in that you can begin experimentally and develop a text that is "conventional" in the end, whether because you abandon the experiments along the way or because there is always so much convention within the experimental. If you threw away all conventions at once, we'd have trouble understanding, period. And I hope that it's transformational, because by opening up possibilities we will be changing conventions along the way.

Diane

Randi, I also want to respond to the question you raise about the possible relations between the conventions (whether disciplinary, curricular, imagined, social) and the experimental or alternative. That's the kind of dynamic that animates my thoughts and my multi-tasking efforts and assignments, I guess, as well as the student's resistance to whatever comes

before them (sometimes it is the unconventional or independent work asked of them that bugs them, and sometimes it is the conventional or the conventions within the possibly unconventional—when detail still matters, and grace and imagery, and grammar, and courtesy to the reader).

Denise

I also think "relationships" are critical in all this. It's not just the relationships between conventionality and other possibilities, but also the relationships inside the text which I'm trying to help students be more conscious of. If they believe they are filling a form, they look for the ingredients and just throw them in. One arguable thesis is held up by three pieces of evidence. No matter that one of those pieces of evidence could also be used against the argument. That's irrelevant when filling a form—1, 2, 3. But when relating material, the *how* of connection is vital. Multi-connections need multi-discussions. You don't just ignore an angle because it doesn't fit a formula, you explore it.

Randi

Diane, what did you mean when you said multitasking?

Diane

On the computer, multi-tasking means a person can work on one task in the foreground (composing an essay) while other tasks go on in the background (printing another document, condensing files). Historically, we might also argue that this is an under-acknowledged skill, especially for women, e.g., a woman might rock one baby while feeding another, put something in the oven, grade student papers, and answer telephone calls.

In high school, I used to write poems in math class using mathematical concepts of various kinds; I often write poems while sitting at a poetry reading; and in graduate school in Seattle, I found myself daydreaming about Walden Pond and literary sites back east as we studied Whitman and Thoreau. Eventually, I wrote a collage essay for my American literature seminar with the Emersonian trope of "circles," overlapping and concentric pieces on Thoreau's homage to "Wild Apples," Amy Lowell's poem "Patterns" in relation to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Melville's Moby Dick. All of these are instances, I think, of writing relationally, which today might be related to multi-tasking or "webbing."

Multi-tasking is one answer to problems we've had with mixing personal writing assignments with academic ones. Assigning the personal before the academic doesn't always work. Students can be disappointed when they do well on personal or informal early responses but are then jolted by comments on their more formal papers that generally fail to demonstrate critical knowledge or conventional writing skills.

To create multi-tasking I have students move through a series of progressive and yet recursive assignments such as those in my autobiographical-criticism course: analytical comparison of forms and purposes of two instances of autobiographical criticism; a personal-associative response to autobiographical criticism or a "primary" text; an annotated bibliography of five other works of autobiographical scholarship; and a culminatory piece of autobiographical criticism drawing on the other assignments. Students are also encouraged to revise the assignments, the order and number of assignments and/or rework any previous assignment. Meanwhile, we're all reading additional published models and classmates' efforts (which are photocopied and distributed, read in progress, and then put on reserve). The multiple tasks are the assignments and the way each assignment is actually a mosaic of the previous and upcoming assignments.

Randi

I don't exactly use multi-tasking as you term it, Diane, but over the past year and a half, as I and several of my colleagues have assigned experimental writing, I have read the work of many students; the second and third and fourth experimental papers I've seen from the same writer are very different from the first. In particular, the papers get deeper, more grounded in work outside of the author, more sophisticated in the relationships they are able to handle. They are less self-centered while still being connected to the writer in significant ways. As with most writers, the more practice they get for various audiences and purposes, they better

they get. And because experimental writing also raises new questions about evaluating writing, I'm finding that for me and my colleagues, it is transforming our processes and our definitions of commonly accepted qualities of good writing—clarity, cohesion, organization, and so on. For instance, evaluating experimental writing requires more dialogue with the writer (I guess cover letters would count, although I prefer face-to-face) in order to understand the experiment. If I try to evaluate the papers without this input, I am more likely to project many more of my assumptions and habits than are helpful to the student or, in the long run, to me.

Denise

What I want to know is: how much different is this need for clarity from other situations? I mean, in classes where form is presumed, not taught (a majority of classes really, even within English departments), wouldn't conferences or cover letters serve the same purpose of helping the evaluator or teacher understand how the writers (the students) understand what they were trying to accomplish with their writing? Whether conferences or cover letters are used, the metanarrative they provide helps someone to evaluate the success or failure of the text as a piece of writing.

Diane

Experimental writing need not always have a metanarrative, as you call it. It ought to work in situ or as a somehow intrinsically informed performance. On the other hand, "cover comments" are most useful not as justification but as information for the reader/grader/instructor about what the writer thinks s/he's going for and why and thus/also how the reader might most helpfully respond or direct the writer towards other readings or publication venues and so forth. Even if you as teacher operate (when possible) with an ethos of letting the writer and writing finds its own best purpose and expression, serving as facilitator and friend (which isn't a role I'm comfortable with, by the way, for all writers and writings or for all courses), such extra information is usefully part of the process of writing, editing, circulating, promoting, and evaluating.

Denise

Even when students are trying to produce "traditional" forms, I find that novices still need to articulate what they're trying to accomplish, and they need the kind of feedback they get in conferences in order to get to a stage where the piece of writing works well on its own. Basically, we need readers, whether we're writing experimentally or not. And we need to form writing several times in any particular way before we begin to be proficient at producing understandable writing for readers. That's where I believe the development comes in. It's not automatic from a particular form. Writers develop by hearing how their writing is read by others, whether peers or evaluators.

Randi

I think you've put your finger on some of the false assumptions we make with traditional writing. It isn't ever all the same, and our assumptions often get in the way even there.

How experimental writing changes our teacherly practices is an important issue to consider. I claimed earlier that experimental writing transforms the perspective of any writer or teacher. It is perhaps this later transformation—that of teachers—that may often puzzle or concern us most, to experiment and then re-exert the control of the same evaluation and reading process we would apply to a traditional piece of writing. But we don't always know what that will mean or demand of us. And our discomfort with the unknown sometimes keeps us perpetuating the same practices over and over.

When I wanted to practice more experimental writing as a grad student, I asked my professors if I could write my papers for their classes experimentally. As with most teachers, their first concern was whether they would know how to evaluate them. However, they courageously consented, and, you know, despite their inexperience with experimental writing, each one of them was able to help me effectively and to evaluate each paper to our mutual satisfaction.

Now as the teacher who must evaluate experimental writing, I find that my students' work nudges me out of my usual processes and practices. I

still assess clarity, cohesion, organization, and development, but these qualities don't always come packaged predictably. Experimental writing requires more dialogue with the students. I THINK of them more as writers, and they respond more as writers—with skills, knowledge, intention, an ability and desire to learn and to use writers' tools. I've never before seen students WANT to revise and revise the way they do with experimental writing. Experimental writing WILL change our practices and those of our students. Perhaps before we get alarmed by that promise, we should consider what exactly we lose; certainly I've lost predictability. However, we should also consider what we—and our students—will gain.